

## Self, Performativity and Vipassana Meditation: Some Theoretical Considerations

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## SELF, PERFORMATIVITY AND VIPASSANA MEDITATION: SOME THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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**Abstract:** The present proliferation of alternative and non-western practices challenges the way how modern selves are enacted, the distinction between ancient and contemporary, and obliges us to rethink the ways our bodies and minds are produced. By mingling the care of the self and self knowledge, some technologies of the self offer interesting paths to redefine and change our selves, questioning the hegemony of Science and Technology as the only way to operate a radical transformation of the human condition.

I propose, through this article, an ontological and performative conception of vipassana meditation, faithful to the performative idiom of Science and Technology Studies, but recognizing its limitations to talk about selves and non-western practices. Performativity, here, is not understood as some naïf nostalgia of pre-representational realism – it rather explores the substantial nature of practice (and ritual), questioning ontological determination and carrying anthropological and political implications.

**Keywords:** selves; performativity; vipassana meditation; personal transformation; ontology.

### INTRODUCTION

I will start this article by providing a brief account of the meaning of the notion of performativity. After this initial explanation, I will revisit some theories of subject formation/enactment that deal, at a certain extent, with the notion of performance or performativity, namely Goffman's, Judith Butler's and Michel Foucault's. Before presenting those three theoretical 'blocks', I will also explore an article by Marcel Mauss and his notion of techniques of the body, as well as Althusser's concept of Ideological State Apparatuses. Those two authors will provide us some interesting thoughts on repetition and reproduction, culturally and sociologically driven. They are distant from the recognition of material agency, that we will not find exactly in the next three authors,

although they give us some valuable notions to rethink self formation in a materially performative manner. Using Foucault's notion of technologies of the self, I will then relate literature on vipassana meditation with the possibility of a performative conception of the self.

## PERFORMATIVITY

First of all, how should we understand performativity? Austin distinguishes constative from performative utterances. Constative utterances describe reality – a good example would be “Gordon Brown is the prime minister of the United Kingdom”. On the other hand, performative utterances *do* something, because by saying what we say, we perform a certain action: “if I say ‘I apologize,’” or “I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth,” or “I beg you sixpence it will rain tomorrow,” then “in saying what I do, I actually perform the action” (Austin *apud* Mackenzie, 2006: 43). Performative utterances question the distinction between description and action, representation and intervention, with interesting consequences for epistemology and STS.

Michel Callon has recently analyzed how economic agents contribute to create economic markets through associations, devices and networks. His thesis is that “both the natural and life sciences, along with the social sciences, contribute towards enacting the realities that they describe” (Callon, 2006: 7). According to him (Callon, 1998: 46-47), economics and economical reality co-constitute themselves, since the discipline formats the markets: laws of the markets are not in the nature of society or humans nor are constructed or invented as ways to simplify a complex reality. Those laws are linked to regularities that are established through the action itself of economy and economists. A simple way to define performativity would be to say that it reports to the joint process commanded by specialists and the materiality of the field that they “describe”. Laws, regularities and trends emerge as a result of performances by different actors, they are not a result of an essence or substance (such as the *homo economicus*).

According to Pickering (1995), we must distinguish between two idioms to talk about Science and Technology. The representative idiom, focusing on ideas, knowledge, concepts, and the performative one, focusing on the practice of the agents involved, not only scientists (and engineers) but also non-humans, paying attention to material (and machinic) agency. Instead of the epistemological tendency that portrays knowledge as a representation of the world, we have to focus on processes of ontological interaction with reality. Classic, modern, detached and free standing knowledge is replaced by a set of performances that have the potential to transform and dance with the material powers of the world – “Knowledge is not some free-standing entity in its own right; it should be

understood as threaded through practice, performance, in a world which cannot be itself reduced to knowledge. I am inclined to say that performance is the ground from which knowledge emerges and to which it returns.” (Pickering, 2007: 44). The recognition of material agency must imply the rejection of modern ontology, opening the space of scientific endeavors that explicitly seek interactions between human and non-human entities, therefore reshaping the conception of science itself – a good example of this is Cybernetics (Pickering, 2010). Processes of Becoming are, therefore, not exclusive of human actors – ontological assemblages are filled with a multiplicity of different entities.

We could say that performativity deals with performances, in the sense that it is interested on dynamics, flows and interactions, not on fixed entities. Entities can only become what they are in a certain network precisely because they are put into processes of interaction (see Law, 1987). However, it is not clear that all performances are performative – for instance, Goffman’s performances are used to give the impression that the performer can “become” a character to the eyes of the audience, and the performer can maintain a cynic or detached attitude – in this case, the performance does not possess an ontological power, since the performer is psychologically distant from the character and the performance is not aiming to create novelty (through active transformation of the described apparatus) but to recreate a role, regulated by previously existing norms.

The Performative may be understood in some different senses: a specific way that language has to act on the world – utterances produce new events; a different way to conceive knowledge – knowledge is no longer the representational mirror of the world, it influences and shapes realities that it “describes”; a form of conceiving ontology – entities are not defined by an essence or substance given *a priori* but by what they do through a set of performances and interactions involving human and non-human agencies.

Some of these dimensions are present in the theories that will be analyzed throughout this essay. Some dimension of performance or performativity is present in each one of these models of conceiving self formation/enactment. However, these different models of facing performative self formation don’t present an alternative to anthropocentric accounts of subjectivation/subjectation. My goal is to provide a material and decentered account of Becoming through the action of technologies of the self. I don’t intend to recreate the same old sociological stories of “cultural representations”, associating names and words to culturally situated collectives. My performative is not the hegemony of words and discourse on the constitution of bodies and matter – “Performativity, properly construed, is not an invitation to turn everything (including material bodies) into words; on the contrary, performativity is precisely a contestation of the excessive power granted to language to

determine what is real.” (Barad, 2003: 802). Although words can be an interesting way of transferring inner states during the practice of meditation into a relatively coherent text, as the history of literature (particularly on altered states) has unequivocally shown, they will, in the future, be recruited to illustrate the material power of practice through an ethnomethodological fashion. They won’t be taken as a mere illustration of the performative powers of discourse, repeating old humanist stories that consider nature and matter as deprived of agency, some sort of clean surface that is shaped by words and human behavior and institutions. An interesting way to assess this is to change the hegemony of discourse by a serious focus on discursive-material practices: “What is needed is a robust account of the materialization of all bodies – “human” and “non-human” – and the material-discursive practices by which their differential constitutions are marked. This will require an understanding of the nature of the relationship between discursive practices and material phenomena, an accounting of “nonhuman” as well as “human” forms of agency, and an understanding of the precise causal nature of productive practices that takes account of the fullness of matter’s implication in its ongoing historicity.” (Barad, 2003: 810). Barad describes her approach as “agential realism”, and questions the post-democratic separation between epistemology and ontology, proposing an onto-epistem-ology:

The separation of epistemology from ontology is a reverberation of a metaphysics that assumes an inherent difference between human and nonhuman, subject and object, mind and body, matter and discourse. Onto-epistem-ology – the study of practices of knowing in being – is probably a better way to think about the kind of understandings that are needed to come to terms with how specific intra-actions matter. (Barad, 2003: 829)

Although my case study focuses on a specific dimension of human condition – spiritual practice – I believe that the inner struggle of agencies experienced by the meditator will illustrate his situation as a cyborgish one. His assemblage is invested by human and non-human forces – non-human forces are not necessarily controlled by identifiable, stable entities *outside* the body but are those manifestations, felt, sensed by the meditator, that are not the fruit of his action – thoughts arising, weird feelings –, creating a process of identification, a paraphernalia of elements that prevent the “desired” detached state of mindful witnessing.

After exploring some theories of self formation that deal with the notion of performance/performativity, I will briefly portray some general ideas concerning the

practice of vipassana meditation, taken as a material process of “liberation” – liberation from reaction and unwanted (non-human?) agency.

### **TECHNIQUES OF THE BODY**

Vipassana is a technique of the soul and a technique of the body. Common techniques of the body are frequently transmitted to make sure individuals do what they are supposed to do with “their” physical structure – such as walking, eating, running or swimming. They have what Piaget would call an ontogenic dimension. Being unable to walk is usually considered a type of disability, not a rational choice or a firm decision in order to be different from the rest of the species/ community.

In his text “Les techniques du corps”, Marcel Mauss (1934) describes how different cultural and social collectives have different ways to perform the body, using different techniques. He resorts to the notion of *habitus* to show the importance of techniques of the body: “these habits vary not only simply with individuals and their limitations, they vary mostly with societies, educations, conveniences and modes, prestige. We have to analyze techniques and the use of collective and individual practical reason” (Mauss, 1934: 7). For Mauss, technique and tradition are united, in the sense that “there is no technique and no transmission if there is no tradition” (*ibidem*: 9). He distinguishes between different practices: techniques of birth and obstetric; techniques of childhood; techniques of adolescence and techniques of the adult age. Mauss considers the body as the “first and most natural instrument of man” (*ibidem*: 10). And it is, indeed, shaped by techniques, that are not only *traditional* but also *efficient* (*ibidem*: 9).

Reflecting on this article by Mauss, we can introduce the notion of *somatic reproduction*. Focusing on the human collective as a cultural machine of production of performances (ignoring non-human agency such as genetics, weather, neurobiology, etc.) we can argue that processes of bodily stabilization take place, and one becomes familiar with certain performances and uses of his body, and less keen to experiment with alternatives.<sup>1</sup>

### **ALTHUSSER AND IDEOLOGY**

Although Althusser wasn't specially concerned with processes of somatic reproduction, his paper “Ideology and State Ideological Apparatus” is especially interesting to understand ideological reproduction and subjection. Being a studios of Marx, the

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<sup>1</sup> Augusto Boal, the famous Brazilian playwriter, has compiled a set of techniques of temporary transformation of bodily performance in his book *Games for actors and non actors* (1992). He argues, in a rather classical top-down political fashion, that social and economic conditions shape one's body according to processes of specialization. Inspired by Bali's Theatre, Artaud (1970) proposed a theatre of cruelty, where the body is invested by multiple agencies to overcome the condition of modern man – the Fall into organic/schizophrenic agency.

dynamics between superstructure and infrastructure somehow identify in the relationships of production the Master Narrative of hegemonic flows. Subjection to ideology is the mode of economic (Master) reproduction – “it is in the forms and under the forms of ideological subjection that provision is made for the reproduction of the skills of labour power” (Althusser, 2008: 7).

Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) serve as devices for the reproduction of the ruling class ideology, such as: the religious ISA; the educational ISA; the family ISA; the legal ISA; the political ISA; the trade-union ISA; the communications ISA; the cultural ISA (*ibidem*: 17). Althusser states that they function predominantly by ideology, and not by repression (although they can also incorporate a dimension of transparent violence). There is no ideology without a subject; how does subjection, the production of subjects, emerge? How does ideology convert individuals into subjects? According to Althusser, individuals are caught in a quadruple system of what we might call “normalization”:

individuals are interpellated as subjects: they are subjected to the Subject; they mutually recognize subjects and Subject, subjects recognize each other and subjects recognize themselves; there is the absolute guarantee that reality is as it appears and, if subjects recognize who they are and behave according to that, everything will be all right. (Althusser, 2008: 55, adapted)

This “Absolute Subject occupies the unique place of the Centre, and interpellates around in the infinity of individuals into subjects in a double mirror-connexion such that it subjects the subjects to the Subject” (*ibidem*: 54). It is a game of mirrors: the Subject is a phantasmatic figure, a surface of reflection, the embodiment of the ruling class ideology.

We should give some more substance to Althusser’s reflections, namely by providing some examples. Althusser refers that School has the dominant role concerning ISA’s (Althusser, 2008: 29). School, as an ISA, “teaches ‘know-how’, but in forms which ensure *subjection to the ruling ideology* or the mastery of its ‘practice’. All the agents of production, exploitation and repression [...] must in one order or another be ‘steeped’ in this ideology in order to perform their tasks ‘conscientiously’ [...]” (*ibidem*: 7). Later, in the same seminal text, Althusser provides a comprehensive account of the process of subjection led by the School Ideological State Apparatus:

It [School] takes children from every class at infant-school age, and then for years, the years in which the child is most ‘vulnerable’, squeezed between the family State apparatus and the educational State apparatus, it drums into them, whether it uses

new or old methods, a certain amount of ‘know-how’ wrapped in the ruling ideology [...] or simply the ruling ideology in its pure state (ethics, civic instruction, philosophy). Somewhere around the age of sixteen, a huge mass of children are ejected ‘into production’: these are the workers or small peasants. Another portion of scholastically adapted youth carries on; and, for better or worse, it goes somewhat further, until it falls by the wayside and fills the posts of small and middle technicians, white-collar workers, small and middle executives, petty bourgeois of all kinds. A last portion reaches the summit, either to fall into intellectual semi-employment, or to provide, as well as the ‘intellectuals of the collective labourer’, the agents of exploitation (capitalists, managers), the agents of repression (soldiers, policemen, politicians, administrators, etc.) and the professional ideologists (priests of all sorts, most of whom are convinced ‘laymen’). (Althusser, 2008: 29)

Poor subjects, for they don’t know they have been subjected, and, although they are a product of ideology, they don’t see themselves as ideological – they have naturalized their ideological trauma and *Weltanschauungen*. One of the many problems of this kind of analysis is that individuals are seen as silently oppressed, and, since they “don’t know what they do”, the voice of the intellectual is necessary to “unveil” the dynamics of hegemonic forces. The problem is that the intellectual elites don’t always agree, therefore the “diagnosis” varies immensely. Social sciences are not like the positivist accounts of natural sciences, and a different diagnosis doesn’t mean a medical “mistake”, like in biomedicine.

With Mauss, we saw how social collectives reproduce bodily uses and performances through general techniques regarding every dimension of the human life. The materiality of the human body is framed within contemporary technologies. With Althusser, we focus on the ideological (mental) dimension, and we can explore the regimes of subject production in capitalist societies. Both authors can contribute to some insights regarding the continuation of models of the human – in Mauss, through tradition, in Althusser through ideology that is artificially reproduced by ISA’s. In order to explore reproduction, *habitus* and the dynamics between structure and agency, we could analyze the work of Pierre Bourdieu.<sup>2</sup> However, our concern is with performance: what performances can tell us about selves and what type of performance is meditation. We will then, in the next section, focus on Goffman’s dramaturgical self.

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<sup>2</sup> See Bourdieu, Pierre (1984), *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press and Bourdieu, Pierre (1977), *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

## GOFFMAN, INTERACTIONS AND SELVES

To *be* a given kind of person [...] is not merely to possess the required attributes, but also to sustain the standards of conduct and appearance that one's social grouping attaches thereto. [...] A status, a position, a social place is not a material thing, to be possessed and then displayed; it is a pattern of appropriate conduct, coherent, embellished, and well articulated. (Goffman, 1969: 81)

This passage from Goffman's report, as he constantly calls it, seems to condense the conceptualization of self as a dramaturgic effect. After this passage, he refers Sartre's reflection on the waiter in the café. It's not only about being able to take orders, to carry beverages diligently, to merely apprehend the practical knowledge apparatus of a profession. It is about appearing as a café waiter, moving fast, embodying a character and a pattern. Where is this character coming from? According to the passage, it lies in the social group, responsible for defining how a given situation has to be presented.

I am focusing on the image of the café waiter, as an individual character, but Goffman usually is concerned about teams, their dynamics, how they safeguard their backstage and present their front. Our interest here is the self, since this article deals with technologies of the self and subjectivity, and Goffman is interesting to reflect on how the self is performed throughout the social world.

What is the self, then? We have to distinguish between two elements: the character's self and the performer's self. The character's self "is a *product* of a scene that comes off, and is not a *cause* of it. The self [...] as a performed character is not an organic thing [...] it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited." (*ibidem*: 245). This character self emerges in a performative way. Not only because it is through and according to a performance, but because he has no material existence outside a certain dramaturgic reality. We will explore this performative self by analyzing Butler's theory of gender enactment.

The performer's self – is it the agent, the creator, some type of con man responsible for fooling others through his/her appearance of a given situation? Since he is playing a part that is not defined by him, he has to learn it. And he has to be extremely orthodox, since he has to follow accredited values: "[...] when the individual presents himself before others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society [...]" (*ibidem*: 45). He has to undergo a learning process that is, usually, done in conjunction with other performers. He may feel anguished for not being

able to *convince* the audience.<sup>3</sup> He definitely, as a performer, *feels* his success and failure:

He has a capacity to learn, this being exercised in the task for training for a part. He is given to having fantasies and dreams, some that pleasurably unfold a triumphant performance, others full of anxiety and dread that nervously deal with vital discrediting in a public front region. He often manifests a gregarious desire for teammates and audiences, a tactful considerateness for their concerns; and he has a capacity for deeply felt shame, leading him to minimize the chances he takes of exposure. (*ibidem*: 246)

Is it fair to accuse performers in the dramaturgical view of social behavior of cynicism? What is cynicism? Sloterdijk affirmed that

Cynicism is enlightened false consciousness. It is that modernized, unhappy consciousness, on which enlightenment has labored both successfully and in vain. It has learned its lessons in enlightenment, but it has not, and probably was not able to, put them into practice. Well-off and miserable at the same time, this consciousness no longer feels affected by any critique of ideology; its falseness is already reflexively buffered. (Sloterdijk, 1987: 5)

Inspired by Heidegger's *enframing* (1977) or Junger's *organic totality* (2000), we could say that the modern cynic is driven by the will to objectify, to operate, to perform and to manage melancholia:

Psychologically, present-day cynics can be understood as borderline melancholics, who can keep their symptoms of depression under control and can remain more or less able to work. [...] this is the central point in modern cynicism: the ability of its bearers to work [...]. The key social positions in boards, parliaments, commissions, executive councils, *publishing companies*, practices, faculties, and lawyers' and editors' offices have long since become a part of this diffuse cynicism . (Sloterdijk, 1987: 5)

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<sup>3</sup> In order to explore the inner dimension of failure, see Goffman (1952). In this essay, the author elaborates on strategies to calm the mark out and the "implications" of social failure, namely the tension between self, expectations and reality.

Opposed to the modern cynic stands the kynic, embodied by the figure of Diogenes. The kynic is not concerned with the exploitation of communal resources, by playing his role in an inauthentic and somehow detached manner (and here the critique of Socrates to the sophists seems interesting). The kynic embodies Sloterdijk's concern: personal enlightenment instead of societal one (personal emancipation somehow opposing social emancipation, although we are not facing antinomic trends). The kynical figure *par excellence* is Diogenes. In the philosophical search for personal enlightenment, he has renounced the community. It was not just an intellectual rejection – he could simply try to erect a new school, finding disciples and selling his perspective to the sons of richmen. However, he decided to live like an animal, to masturbate in public, to *suspend* his culture and humanity: “The kynic farts, shits, pisses, masturbates on the street, before the eyes of the Athenian market. He shows contempt for fame, ridicules the architecture, refuses respect, parodies the stories of gods and heroes, eats raw meat and vegetables, lies in the sun, fools around with the whores and says to Alexander the Great that he should get out of his sun.” (Sloterdijk, 1987: 104).

According to Sloterdijk, kynicism is a type of dog philosophy, a rejection of idealism. Being a drop out, moving away from mainstream societal structure, is not something only achieved by Diogenes. Greek tragedy is, frequently, about the tension between personal belief and communitarian law; between what one feels that is right and what has to do as a legal member of a community of men – between the laws of gods and laws of men. Kierkegaard (2009), in “Fear and Trembling”, has brilliantly explored the tension between three ethical/ontological/anthropological stages – the aesthetical; the ethical and the religious. Don Juan, Kant and Abraham. Abraham, whose faith and loyalty is tested by god, has to suspend community, the golden rule, reason and the love for his son in order to accept god's will. He kills his son in spirit before an angelic figure prevents the bloodshed.

Although Socrates was condemned for corrupting the youth and for not believing in the gods of his city state, there is a thin line between corruption and reformation; and the belief in polytheism was clearly substituted by a demiurgic monotheism. Socrates accepted the sentence of death by poisoning, but he spoke almost until the last breath. He was not a cynic, but he definitely supported a linguistic, oral process of *truth unveiling*. With Diogenes it was different; he wasn't just an intellectual opposition to the political mainstream of his time; he was an embodied spirit, a materialist:

In the dog philosophy of the kynic [...], a materialistic position appears that is clearly a match for the idealist dialectic. It possesses the wisdom of original philosophy, the

realism of a fundamental materialist stance, and the serenity of an ironic religiosity. For all his crassness, Diogenes is not cramped in opposition or fixated on contradiction. His life is marked by a humorous self-certainty characteristic only of great spirits. (Sloterdijk, 1987: 104)

After exploring the difference between cynicism and kynicism, we should return to Goffman's work. Is the performer a cynic? According to the American thinker, certain professions, or certain learning processes, at certain times have to rely on cynicism, mainly to protect and *adapt* the performer to the inquisitorial power of the public eye – “Professions which the public holds in religious awe often allow their recruits to follow it in this direction (cynicism) not because of a slow realization that they are deluding their audience [...] but because they can use this cynicism as a means of insulating their inner selves from contact with the audience.” (Goffman, 1969: 31). He gives the example of students of medicine as going back and forth from cynicism to sincerity and vice-versa – “[...] students of medical suggest that idealistically oriented beginners in medical school typically lay aside their holy aspirations for a period of time. [...] It is only after their medical schooling has ended that their original ideas about medical service may be reasserted.” (*ibidem*).

Is it fair to affirm that, for Goffman, the performing self is a cynic? What he says is different – he affirms that *sincerity* is not a *conditio sine qua non* for the success of the performance, just the *appearance* of sincerity regarded by the audience.

[...] let it be said that there are many individuals who sincerely believe that the definition of the situation they habitually project is the real reality. In this report, I do not mean to question their proportion in the population but rather the structural relation of their sincerity to the performances they offer. If a performance is to come off, the witnesses by and large must be able to believe that the performers are sincere. This is the structural place of sincerity in the drama of events. Performers may be sincere [...] but this kind of affection for one's part is not necessary for its convincing performance. [...] This suggests that while persons usually are what they appear to be, such appearances could still have been managed. (*ibidem*: 77)

Although performers are not cynics all the time, *authenticity* is disposable. Following Park, we can say that the word person is, in a first meaning a mask and individuals only become persons through the achievement of character (Park *apud* Goffman, 1969: 30). Goffman also follows Durkheim, referring the bureaucratization of the spirit (Goffman,

1969: 64) and also Santanyana (*ibidem*: 65), when he refers that humans substitute their animal habits by duties and loyalties.

The situations that Goffman analyzed in his “report” are usually connected to a certain ability or professional activity that requires interaction. We can, eventually, think about an inversion of Foucault’s (1975) reflection on the panopticon. Visibility doesn’t give the observer the possibility of monitoring and register the behavior of the observed (the prisoner, for instance). In Goffman’s case, the visibility of the performers somehow “obliges” them to assume a certain undisputed and well performed character, and only a good and trained observer (like an experienced ethnographer) will be able to deconstruct the “game”. Interactions not only change behaviors; they are the foundation of social behavior. According to the author:

[...] interaction (that is, face-to-face interaction) may be roughly defined as the reciprocal influence of individuals upon one another’s actions when in one another’s immediate physical presence. *An* interaction may be defined as all the interaction which occurs throughout any one occasion when a given set of individuals are in one another’s continuous presence; the term ‘an encounter’ would do as well. (*ibidem*: 26).

In another text, he provides another definition: “Social interaction can be identified narrowly as that which uniquely transpires in social situations that is, environments in which two or more individuals are physically in one another’s response presence.” (*ibidem*: 2)

Although Goffman refers a certain orthodoxy and a way of doing things that the performer has to learn, in order to perform correctly, his conception of power has some connections with the one by Foucault. Goffman’s analysis is a type of microsociology, as he usually says, and, therefore, the focus is on teams and individual performances, not on some kind of top-down power apparatus derived from State or Institutions – “To be sure, the interaction order prevailing even in the most public places is not a creation of the apparatus of a state. [...] Certainly most of this order comes into being and is sustained from below as it were, in some cases in spite of overarching authority not because of it.” (Goffman, 1982: 6). Interactions are manifestations of power of individuals upon individuals, and Foucault (1976), when he is talking about power in the first volume of *History of Sexuality*, also uses a microphysical language – power is present in every connection between agents, and we can easily transform connections, points and links

into interactions. Governing other's behavior, the action of men on men is, as we will analyze in this document, is one of the three forms of power the French thinker identifies.

Goffman, explicitly dialoguing with Bourdieu, refuses that social encounters are mere micro reproductions of a greater social structure. He accepts that "reproductions" can occur in what he defines as people processing encounters:

there are people-processing encounters, encounters in which the "impression" subjects make during the interaction affects their life chances. The institutionalized example is the placement interview as conducted by school counselors, personnel department psychologists, psychiatric diagnosticians, and courtroom officials. In a less candid form, this processing is ubiquitous; everyone is a gatekeeper in regard to something." (Goffman, 1982: 8)

However, these are exceptions. Goffman's concern is to focus on microsociological analysis, and he believes that are some elements, such as the structure of kinship systems, the systematic phonological shifts within the dialects of a speech community or the ethnic succession in municipal administration (*ibidem*: 9) that can't be "discovered" just by a mere process of aggregation of social encounters. Social encounters are not, using Bourdieu's terms, the reproduction of dominant ideology or some kind of magic portal to unveil and achieve total knowledge about every social phenomena, namely macro ones. And there are no encounters or interactions outside a specific cultural sphere, which is different from affirming that they are mere reproductions of those cultural "structures": "to speak of the relatively autonomous forms of life in the interaction order [...] is not to put forward these forms as somehow prior, fundamental, or constitutive of the shape of macroscopic phenomena. [...] All elements of social life have a history and are subject to critical change through time, and none can be fully understood apart from the particular culture in which it occurs" (*ibidem*: 9).

Performances are enactments of influence, power, status. According to Goffman, "a 'performance' may be defined as all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants" (Goffman, 1969: 26). However, different interactions take place, and different parts are enacted: "defining social role as the enactment of rights and duties attached to a given status, we can say that a social role will involve one or more parts and that each of these different parts may be presented by the performer on a series of occasions to the same kinds of audience or to an audience of the same persons" (*ibidem*: 27). With this conception, Goffman wants to move away from two dogmas that seem to prevail in the study of social interactions:

social contract<sup>4</sup> and normative consensus.<sup>5</sup> The existence of regularities or common *topoi* regarding social interactions should not be mistaken with some kind of submission to general and supra-individual rules, in the sense that those regularities become invisible procedural settings for performative action – Goffman seems to defend that it is necessary to get on with the business at hand:

although it is certainly proper to point to the unequal distribution of rights in the interaction order [...] and the unequal distribution of risk [...] the central theme remains of a traffic of use, and of arrangements which allow a great diversity of projects and intents to be realized through unthinking recourse to procedural forms. And of course, to accept the conventions and norms as given is, in effect, to put trust in those about one. Not doing so, one could hardly get on with the business at hand; one could hardly have any business at hand. (Goffman, 1982: 6)

### THE PERFORMATIVE GENDER

Judith Butler's reflections on gender are truly interesting for this research, and formulate a set of statements regarding the constitution of subjects, namely the deconstruction of a crystallized Feminine, changing the political ground of gender "wars" in an androcentric society. Gender is now constituted in a performative form. There is no longer a "feminine" or "masculine" substance. There are, however, gender performances, following power "interpellations", originating somatic responses. Gestures and repetitions fabricate transformations of individuals; performances create "phantasmatic" pseudo-substances:

Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. (Butler, 1990: 185)

In another text, and reflecting on Althusser, Butler illustrates how the process of interpellation creates the "nominated" subject: "The doctor who receives the child and

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<sup>4</sup> "the overall effect of a given set of conventions is that all participants pay a small price and obtain a large convenience, the notion being that any convention that facilitates coordination would do, so long as everyone could be induced to uphold it-the several conventions in themselves having no intrinsic value" (Goffman, 1982: 5).

<sup>5</sup> "the traditional sociological view that individuals unthinkingly take for granted rules they nonetheless feel are intrinsically just." (Goffman, 1982: 5).

pronounces: “It’s a girl” begins that long string of interpellations by which the girl is transitively girded: gender is ritualistically repeated, whereby the repetition occasions both the risk of failure and the congealed effect of sedimentation.” (Butler, 1997: 49).

Performance, repetition and ritual seem to establish a relationship. Not that there is someone, a sovereign, with the hegemony and legitimacy to impose a performance or an act (there is always the remission to the past and citationality); not that someone is “constituted” or “fabricated” only one time – the way of performativity is precisely this need of constant actualization and repetition for the “call” of the subject that is created; not that the normalizing force is inscribed as discourse in bodies in one unique moment – its ability to generate effects depends on the possibility of repetition. If, on one hand, that illustrates a certain permeability of individuals regarding the forces that act upon them, on the other hand it elucidates the fragility of power strategies. They are dependent on a constant call and nomination, subjection, so that the correlation can be drawn between the form of practice and the subject:

[...] when the subject is said to be constituted, that means simply that the subject is the consequence of certain rule-governed discourses that govern the intelligible invocation of identity. The subject is not *determined* by the rules through which it is generated because signification is *not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition* that both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantializing effects. In a sense, all signification takes place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat; “agency”, then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition. (Butler, 1990: 198)

Performativity is a kind of iterative citationality, and this conception seems to value discourse over matter in terms of Becoming. Performance seems to materially shape the body (actually, the perception of the body), therefore gender is “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler, 1990: 45). The role of material agency seems to be inexistent. Bodies seem to be, as in Foucault, docile – they show no resistance to discourse oriented performances. Although material agency is secundarized, we are very distant from classic anthropocentric tales of subjection. If there is material passivity, the subject is equally trespassed by “external” inputs, in the form of discourse: “If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a

discourse of primary and stable identity” (Butler, 1990: 186). Not only gender is produced by discourse but the body itself cannot exist independently of a set of acts that constitute it.

What is, then, the role of performativity for Butler’s gender construction? For her, performativity operates through anticipation and repetition: “In the first instance, the performativity of gender revolves around... the way in which the anticipation of a gendered essence produces that which it posits as outside itself. Secondly, performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration” (Butler, 1990: xiv). Once again, to perform is to *appear* in a certain way, therefore to act according to a certain set of preexisting norms and rules that are discursive; the body assumes a cultural form, and becomes the surface of an essence that is aprioristically “created”; however, this process of interiorization and naturalization is not merely mental, it is somatic, and flesh is culturally produced. The main difference between Butler and Goffman is that, for Butler, it seems to be difficult to distinguish between the character and the performer’s self. The subject is absolutely absorbed by performances, so we can’t talk about the cynic performer – he/she is permeable to discourse (practically since his birth) – the identification with performance seems total.

Butler’s contribution is a very interesting example of a performative approach of subject formation, however it is a non-material account of performativity. Gender enactments are not led by material agency but by a discursive one. Moreover, her work owes immensely to Michel Foucault, where we find a clear link between phenomena of power and subjection. We also find in his work how power and subjects are intertwined through technologies and devices that contribute to the fabrication of certain selves. The notion of technologies of the self will assume a particular interest for this article.

## **SUBJECTS AND POWER**

It will not be possible to fully assess, in the context of this document, the contribution of Michel Foucault to understand the fabrication of selves. In his most “metaphysical” (or abstract) work, “The archaeology of knowledge”, the figure of the subject appears as a possible position in a set of forces in coexistence. The tension lines are beyond human agency: they are structures that can be identified through “archeological” enquiry. The subject can only emerge in relation to those networks of power/knowledge, so he shouldn’t be mistaken by authorial or agential entity, it is a product and the possibility of occupying a certain “space”. For him, the “subject of the statement [...] is a particular,

vacant space that may in fact be filled by different individuals” (Foucault, 1972: 107). It is, at a certain extent, the possibility of utterance.

Who determines the possible iterations regarding the occupation of that space? In the case of Foucault, Truth is still haunted by the problem of representation, therefore discursive devices are constantly shaping (historically, culturally, sociologically) the mediation between speech and truth, words and things:

Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (Foucault, 1980: 131)

Should we face this somehow “constrained” conception of truth and its verbal iterations as determining the field of agency of individuals? Foucault defends that individuals are fabricated through those *dispositifs* of knowledge, and the focus is on utterances and discourse, not on some obscure interiority:

the positivities which I have tried to establish must not be understood as a set of determinations imposed from the outside on the thought of individuals, or inhabiting it from the inside, in advance as it were; they constitute rather the set of conditions in accordance with which a practice is exercised, in accordance with which that practice gives rise to partially or totally new statements, and in accordance with which it can be modified. These positivities are not so much limitations imposed on the initiatives of subjects as the field in which that initiative is articulated.” (Foucault, 1972: 230)

This process of belonging is, clearly, one of the many faces of power, and is accompanied by forms of resistance – “resistance to power [...] exists all the more by being in the same place as power; hence, like power, resistance is multiple and can be integrated in global strategies.” (Foucault, 1980: 142).

When Foucault talks about power, he distinguishes three dimensions: one concerning the domain of things, technique and the transformation of real; another one relative to communication and signs, the fabrication of meaning and, finally, another one that is

related to means of constraint, the action of men on other men and inequality (Foucault, 1982: 1053). In the first volume of *History of Sexuality* he brilliantly exposes this omnipresence of power, emergent in every connection between two entities – we could even think of an *ontocracy*. The exercise of power, ontologically, means the modulation of the positioning and iteration of reality. To exercise power is to manage and coordinate conducts, to positioning children, souls, communities, families and diseases, it is to structure the possibilities of action (*ibidem*: 1056), to determine how a certain space will be occupied and the individual subjected.

Subject as a byproduct of power processes is an idea that we can draw from Foucault's incursion into the history of punishment and prison. Power on men is configured by distinct forms according to the institutions they are subjected to, the practices they should undertake and the figure/archetype they must assume. The prison is a subject-making assemblage, it should be a place for the transformation of souls, a "machine to modify spirits" (Foucault, 1975: 148).

How does this transformation take place? By governing the behaviors through a set of technologies, that include "forms of coercion, schemes of constraint applied and repeated. Exercises [...], schedules, utilization of time, obligatory movements, regular activities, solitary meditation, work in community, silence [...] respect, good habits" (*ibidem*: 152). What is at stake is not only to readjust a propension for the penal deviance; it is, above all, to modify the being of the individual, its self: "it is the obedient subject, the individual subjected to habits, rules, orders, an authority that is continuously exerted around him and in him, and that he must let automatically function on him" (*ibidem*).

The Subject/position is built performatively, in the sense that the individual, to become a subject, has to be the target of a set of procedures that transform and adequate him to a certain project of fabrication. Power/knowledge is that nebulous complex that is manifested on the epistemological implications of power, in that fold where the knowledge of human spirit and being is, at the same time, the plain surface of investment and a project for its transformation. The body is docile and permeable to subjection. However, we could argue that the prison, using Althusserian terminology, is a Repressive State Apparatus, so it is not necessarily ideological; we could say that, only after a violent process of social transgression, the individual is forced to be "normalized". However, the several devices that are enrolled to normalize the subject ultimately are denaturalized as technologies to produce different selves – ultimately, ISA's, as sources of constant interaction and inter-relation, are *exposed* as political and ideologically situated, teleologically driven. However, we can't analyze devices (*dispositifs*) as reducing valves, diminishing the range of possible agencies. *Dispositifs* are productive, they multiply and

also provoke new resistances: “We must cease to always describe effects of power in negative terms: it ‘excludes’, it ‘represses’, it ‘buries’, it ‘censors’, it ‘abstracts’, it ‘masks’, it ‘hides’. In fact power produces; it produces the real; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and our knowledge of this individual come from this production.” (Foucault *apud* Gomart and Hennion, 1999: 221).

In his post-humanist and material account of power, Foucault, more than saying that power is everywhere (1976), is opening the possibility of the politics of material agency. However, if from his analysis we can operate a de-humanization of structures of power specifically regarding the enactment of bodies and selves, “queering Marx” (Barad, 2003: 809), specifically through the notion of biopolitics (the governance of life itself), material agency seems to be absent from his approach. Although there are structures that regulate human behavior, speech, a Master Subject that makes individuals into subjects, this discursive *mattering* ultimately repositions humans in the field of pure objectification, standing along with nature as passively receptive before some sort of Hegelian *Geist*.

Foucault’s historical analysis doesn’t explore sufficiently the struggles of agency inherent to inner processes of becoming. To assess that process, and to move to a post-humanist and STS conception of performativity, it would be necessary to resort to empirical devices, such as phenomenological description, narrative reconstruction or ethnomethodology. Foucault, following Wittgenstein, doesn’t explore the inner dimension of experience, the battlefield for subjectification and performativity. This doesn’t mean, however, that we should reject his expression of technologies of the self. They will be explored as operating modifications that can be described by looking at interactions between different material powers inherent to the embodied human assemblage, with a clear inspiration from the post-humanist STS. Although this will be done linguistically, materiality and material agency should not be relegated to a second plan.

### **TECHNOLOGIES OF THE SELF**

Material agency is, in fact, crucial to understand subject formation and normalization, and the brilliant analysis in *Discipline and Punish* finds echoes in his work with other *dispositifs* – sexuality, spirituality, medicine, and brief incursions into education. The notion of technologies of the self seems to brilliantly condense the fundamental role of procedures and physical apparatuses to stabilize, normalize, form, transform and multiply subjects. It emerges in the context of a series of practices that mingle the care of the self and self-knowledge, namely from Greek schools of philosophy until the early Christian era. Technologies of the self emerge in a context where spiritual practice and “acquisition” of knowledge stand side by side, something that seems highly strange and esoteric for

contemporary standards of academic knowledge – “[...] truth cannot be attained without a certain practice, or set of fully specified practices, which transform the subject’s mode of being, change its given mode of being, and modify it by transfiguring it [...]” (Foucault, 2006: 46). Foucault exemplifies four types of practices that are found in practically every civilization with the objective of attaining truth: rites of purification; techniques for the concentration of the soul; techniques of withdrawal; techniques of development of endurance to support pain (*ibidem*: 47-48).

Practices of spiritual transformation usually involve a radical critique/rejection of societal values and forms of “bodily normalization”, similar to what Sloterdijks talks about when he is referring some biographical aspects of Diogenes. The 60’s have shown how self-exploration and experimentation usually come side by side with societal rejection. Leary’s famous phrase “Tune in, Turn on, Drop out” resembles classic stories of social detachment.

Stories of deep resubjection are permeable to ethics, morals and fault. Irigaray, in a very interesting and personal account, inspired by her practice of Yoga, talks about how conscious breathing, very common among Eastern Sages, is opposed to western collective and unconscious *souffle*: “we are somehow divided between two breaths: the natural breath and the cultural breath, without real alliance or passage between these two breaths, neither in ourselves nor between ourselves” (Irigaray, 1999: 101).

Although *vipassana* and Yoga present considerable differences, both in complexity and performances, the development of awareness is of utmost importance for the technology I will analyze further. If we could talk about a *Wille zur Macht* of the meditator, it would be the contemplation of pure reality, achieving a new ontological constitution and reaching what Pickering (1995) considers non-standard human agency. In this case, the redefinition of human agency presupposes an *epoché* of *standard* and *normal* societal forces – embracing a technology of the self, the individual becomes a new subject, able to coordinate different performances, so he/she has to embrace different ways of *using* his/her body.

## VIPASSANA MEDITATION

Ajahn Sumedho distinguishes two major types of meditation in Buddhism: Samatha and Vipassana. Samatha meditation consists on “concentrating the mind on an object, rather than letting it wander off to other things. One chooses an object such as the sensation of breathing, and puts full attention on the sensations of the inhalation and exhalation. Eventually through this practice you begin to experience a calm mind [...]” (Sumedho, 1987: 13). With Vipassana, also called insight meditation,

you are not choosing any particular object to concentrate on or absorb into, but watching in order to understand the way things are. [...] what we can see about the way things are, is that all sensory experience is impermanent. [...] In vipassana, we take this characteristic of impermanence (or change) as a way of looking at all sensory experience that we can observe while sitting here. (Sumedho, 1987: 14)

One of the goals of becoming aware of impermanence is to realize that previous attitudes were based on misconceptions. According to Goenka, vipassana is – “Observing reality as it is, without any preconceptions, in order to disintegrate apparent truth and to reach ultimate truth [...] The purpose of disintegrating apparent reality is to enable the meditator to emerge from the illusion of I” (Goenka, 1987: 90). As a technology of truth, the meditator has to sacrifice his I, his previous mind, to achieve other epistemological realm. He has to abandon reactive mind, full of impurities designated as *sankharas*, mental formations that constitute the basis for volitional and reactive activity, the basis of regular consciousness, food for the mind (*ibidem*: 71). *Sankharas* are eradicated through a specific way of witnessing, equanimity; and when the mind is not producing new *sankharas* to feed the flow of consciousness, it starts to dwell on old *sankharas* (Goenka, 1987: 71-72). There can be no freedom in blind reaction, so the mind has to be trained to clean all the impurities – “if the mind is trained to become fully conscious of all that occurs within the physical structure and at the same time to maintain equanimity, then the old habit of blind reaction is broken. One learns how to remain equanimous in every situation, and can therefore live a balanced, happy life” (*ibidem*: 60-61).

Liberation can only be achieved through practice that leads to experiential wisdom (*bhāvanā-mayā paññā*), superior both to received and intellectual wisdom. The process can be activated by intellectual knowledge, but it has to rely on a specific technique – meditation. The spirit has to be materially modified, and there are three stages to progress across the path: learning about the technique; putting the technique into practice; penetration – the technique is used to go into the depths of inner reality, progressing to the final path (Hart, 1987: 119). At the end of the line lies nirvana, which, according to Hart, can only be described in negative terms, reminding us of the negative or apophatic theology of some Christian philosophers.

The process is, indeed, teleological, and work is crucial to attain liberation. Mind has to be tamed, so the meditator, in the beginning, doesn't start with vipassana. He starts with Anapana meditation (choiceless observation of the breath) (Singh, 2007: 4). After some few days of concentrating on the nostrils, watching the breath coming in and going

out, he is able to start Vipassana meditation, which technically corresponds to the equanimous observation of bodily sensations (*ibidem*). The habit of mind has to be broken, and a new apparatus has to be created through intense practice (not only at sporadic retreats but daily).

At this initial stage, it is possible to envision vipassana as a good illustration of what material liberation means and how technologies of the self work. Material liberation is a process that, instead of considering power at the macro level, identifies the bodily and mental aspects of subjection, so the practice of emancipation is a physical action on oneself. The flesh is the *loci* of the struggle of agencies; reaction must be overcome and impurities depleted through technological and embodied self-reflexivity (Pagis, 2009). The technology is designed in a somehow linear fashion. There are phases to be crossed, maps already drawn that contain the key for each step, records of the ontological scenario of each “module”. One has to be prepared and accept *sila* to be inscribed into a community of seekers.

Self-transformation encompasses ethics, ontology and epistemology. The most primary technology, the body, as a representative machine, is changed through an alteration of somatic and performative order. The transformation is only achieved through individual practice, rejecting the hegemony of what Huxley (1963) called the verbal humanities, and highlighting the performative and aesthetic dimensions of education. Technologies of the self and vipassana can contribute to rethink the social production of selves and to put in place new politics of experience, questioning normalization and normality: “what we call ‘normal’ is a product of repression, denial, splitting, projection, introjections, and other forms of destructive action on experience [...]” (Laing, 1967: 24).

The self of Vipassana is, indeed, performative. The bodily and mental performances associated to the technique apparatus have effects that transcend the mere representation of ontological subjectivities. The new self emerges through struggles of agency between the meditator and his assemblage; the technique has a specific *telos* – a calm, mindful, liberated human being. However, it should not be analyzed as an *enframing* process, limiting the range of action. As a *dispositif* for the creation of selves, it multiplies experiences. Part of my future work will be the attempt to bring to light those inner experiences, narratives of cruel agential choreographies between a multitude of elements that populate inner experience.

## CONCLUSION

With Mauss, we saw how different societies enact their bodies in different forms, through techniques of the body; with Althusser, we analyzed how ideology is silently reproduced through Ideological State Apparatuses; with Goffman, we saw how the presentation of self is a dramaturgical activity, and how performances tend to a commonly accepted definition of situations. With Butler we explored the naturalization of gender through ritualized and repeated performances and Foucault highlighted the decentered dimension of the fabrication of selves through *dispositifs*.

We have also distinguished between different conceptions of performativity, and we have decided to embrace a conception of this ontological mode of *mattering* that is post-humanist, rejecting the social/humanist side of the two cultures divide, recognizing the performativity of non-human agency.

Technologies of the self permit a redefinition of what means to be part of a collective of individuals, by materially altering the experience of flesh, mind and reality. Spiritual transformation, as onto-epistem-ological redefinition, is, without a shadow of doubt, political. Not in the old fashioned sense of questioning cultural investments on passive matter/body, but in the sense that the topology of human inner experience, the inner *polis*, is repopulated. In the case of vipassana, we can think of a mental nuclear bomb that annihilates mental citizenship – the identification between self and mind, through the destruction of the self.

Terrence Mckenna calls the apparatus that produces “normal” or standard selves the cultural operating system. He defends that, only after the suspension of this operating system through psychoactive substances (such as ayahuasca, LSD or DMT), humans can start questioning their condition – “What does it mean to be human; what kind of circumstances are we caught in; and what kind of structures, if any, can we put in place to assuage the pain and accentuate the glory and the wonder that lurks waiting for us in this very narrow slice of time, between the birth canal and the yawning grave.”<sup>6</sup> With meditation, what is at stake is not just the substitution of software via an update. It is a redefinition also of the hardware assemblage of the human, and it questions aspects such as: what does it mean to be a body; what is the transformative nature of performance; what does it mean to be part of human society; what kind of entities coexist with us in this body/mind; what type of associations can we arrange to redefine/redesign our living assemblages.

The geography of vipassana’s struggle for application and transformation is composed of representations, memories, feelings and all sorts of negotiations. To

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<sup>6</sup> Mckenna, Terrence – *Culture is Your Operating System* – <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9c8an2XZ3MU>.

recognize that those agencies and elements, although they are interior to humans and their experiences, are non-human, in the sense that they are not *consciously* produced by the meditator, but rather appear as part of his inner processes, might contribute to question the separation between humans and non-humans, assuming that entities are populated by different agents that make all sorts of different things. By following this line of thought, meditation cannot be considered a way to the reaffirmation of anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism, but rather a radical path to be in contact with the multitude of beings that arise during our inner experience. To use our one species to deconstruct *ontological stability* seems to be a safe and relatively legitimate endeavor.

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### **MEDIA RESOURCES**

Mckenna, Terrence – Culture is your operating system, available at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9c8an2XZ3MU&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9c8an2XZ3MU&feature=player_embedded) (last consulted on 26/03/2010)